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7 Prison Guards in Pennsylvania Charged With Sexually Abusing Inmates

By **MATTHEW HAAG**

Six correction officers and one former officer have been charged with sexually abusing female inmates, some for more than a decade, at a long-troubled county prison in Pennsylvania, the authorities said on Thursday.

The seven men created a culture of fear and coerced sex inside the Lackawanna County Prison in Scranton, using their positions of power over the inmates to force them into sexual acts in cells and utility closets, officials said.

The sexual abuse was common and widely known within the prison, where guards alerted one another if supervisors were coming while they were having sex, Josh Shapiro, the state's attorney general, said.

"This was not one rogue prison guard," Mr. Shapiro said at a news conference on Thursday announcing the charges. "They took advantage of them for their own sick gratification. Then they threatened to make these inmates' lives worse if they told anyone about the abuse."

The seven correction officers, one of whom left the prison in recent years, were arrested on Wednesday and each faces various charges, including sexual assault. If convicted, they could face decades in prison, the authorities said.

The charges were a result of a yearlong investigation by the attorney general's office and a statewide

grand jury. Mr. Shapiro said that many of the women who came forward with abuse allegations were reluctant to talk, leading him to believe there may other women who are afraid to tell their stories.

The attorney general's office took the case over from the Lackawanna County district attorney's office, which cited a potential conflict of interest as its reason for handing over the investigation. Mr. Shapiro did not elaborate about the possible conflict, though he said that prison officials had been aware of assault allegations but that there was no evidence they had been fully investigated.

Mr. Shapiro said the state's investigation remained open and hinted that investigators were looking into whether Lackawanna County officials ignored the abuse allegations.

"Whenever you see this kind of scope, whenever you see this kind of pervasive culture that was allowed to exist, you have to wonder how far up the chain this goes," Mr. Shapiro said. "I want this community to know we are continuing to work to answer that question."

Several female inmates told the grand jury that the guards offered them cigarettes, commissary goods and additional time on the phone in exchange for sex, according to court documents. While some guards took the inmates into closets to have sex, others showed little fear of getting

caught and propositioned inmates in their cells.

At least one guard, who worked at the Lackawanna County Prison from 1999 to 2013, devised a system with other officers to alert one another if they were about to be caught, officials said. If the sexual acts inside the jail cell needed to be cut short, the court documents said, guards inside a jail monitoring room would remotely "click" the cell lock to alert the guard.

Some of the allegations are from more than a decade ago, a period during which several other Lackawanna correction officers were accused of assault. A former guard pleaded guilty in 2015 to sexually assaulting five inmates from 2002 to 2011. Several female inmates filed a lawsuit in 2016 claiming that they had been sexually abused by guards.

In the lawsuit, one of the inmates claimed that she reported allegations of sexual abuse to an assistant warden at the prison, who "sent officers into her cell to destroy her complaints." Some guards named in the lawsuit were among those charged on Thursday.

A county spokesman told The Associated Press that many of the allegations "occurred many, many years ago," and that the prison was safe.